

‘The spirit of Man’: the classical hero of the Great War

Elizabeth Speller

The poets of the First World War were deeply conscious of the literary heritage of war poetry, stretching back to Greece and Rome. Drawing links between themselves and mythical predecessors, they used classical precedents both to glorify war and to condemn it.

Arms and the man

*Sons of one's school across the sea,
We have no fear to fight, for we
Have echo of our deeds in you,
We have our ἀοιδός too...
So now for all the ages through
We are all living and dead too*

C. H. Sorley, *I have not brought my Odyssey* (1915)

In January 1916, Longmans Green published an anthology of prose and poetry selected by the Poet Laureate, Robert Bridges. *The spirit of Man* aimed to inspire and console those suffering in war and it was to become enormously popular, running into four editions by August that year. It was presented to soldiers embarking on overseas duty and early editions were published in khaki cloth. Many anthologies of war poetry were to follow, including the *Muse in arms* (1917) and the *Golden Treasury of war poetry* (1917), but none met the success of Bridges' book.

Bridges introduced the purpose of his work. At a time of 'insensate and interminable slaughter', he stated, it was essential to contemplate 'the good and the beautiful'. He ended: 'We can therefore be happy in our sorrows, happy even in the death of our beloved who fall in the fight; for they die nobly, as heroes die, with hearts and hands unstained by hatred or wrong'.

The Boer War of 1899 had seen the first literate army go into battle. Fifteen years later the British Expeditionary Force which embarked for France was not just literate but literary across the ranks. It was an army travelling with books and accompanied by educationalists. Lessons given to private soldiers by volunteer teachers included classes in ancient Greek and ancient history. Letters from soldiers of all ranks, to home and to each other, are full of requests for specific books and comments on those read. Among many classical texts combatants mention as having with them are the *Odyssey*, *Iliad*, and *Aeneid*, and the works of Petronius, Ovid, Herodotus, Plato, and Theocritus. Young officers, emerging from an education not so much rich in the classics as limited to them, had few other literary models to understand their circumstances and explore their expectations.

The year of publication was to prove a pivotal date in both the experience and expression of warfare. *The spirit of Man* was first published in the month conscription was introduced and six months before the Battle of the Somme, the first day of which

claimed around 58,000 British casualties and which remains the worst day for losses in British military history. As he compiled his choices only months after the outbreak of war, Robert Bridges selected predictable authors: Shakespeare, Milton, Gray, Shelley, and Wordsworth. Pastoral quotations depicted a golden age of agricultural innocence. (In his prologue Bridges cited mechanization as one of the evils leading to war.) But for moral authority, the book looked to the classics: Aristotle, Plotinus, Thucydides, Epictetus, Nicias, Plato, Ptolemy, Lucian, Marcus Aurelius, Homer, and Virgil. There were many more classical texts than excerpts from the Bible, and none at all from the Book of Common Prayer.

At this stage, organized information concerning the cultural significance of warfare was directed from Britain's educated, largely non-combatant elite, outwards to new soldiers and to their families. Bridges' choices directed the less educated reader to the texts befitting a nation and its young men facing conflict and death. Nobility was defined through historic example but Bridges only used poetry from two men with experience of the current conflict. One was by Julian Grenfell and three by Rupert Brooke. Both had died that year. Choosing dead over surviving poets was one way in which the model of heroism was being constructed but those poets' posthumous images had already been manipulated to a classical ideal by their families, friends, and fellow writers.

Grenfell's poem *Into Battle* had first been published in *The Times* with the announcement of his death from wounds in France. It swiftly became one of the most popular war poems. The son of a peer, educated at Eton and Oxford, decorated and twice mentioned in dispatches, Grenfell's lingering end in a military hospital permitted an extraordinary deathbed performance. His mother, Lady Desborough, reported that his penultimate words, as a ray of sunlight struck his bed, were 'Phoebus Apollo'. She raised a statue of Phoebus Apollo in the grounds of the family home at Taplow, in memory of Julian and his brother, Billy, who was killed two months later. Julian's poem was engraved on the plinth.

*And when the burning moment breaks,
And all things else are out of mind,
And only Joy-of-Battle takes
Him by the throat, and makes him blind,
Through joy and blindness he shall know,
Not caring much to know, that still
Nor lead nor steel shall reach him, so
That it be not the Destined Will.*

Troy renewed

Grenfell saw himself, and was seen by others, as Achilles. In him, Joy-of-Battle combined with a carelessness about death. His pursuits included game-shooting; his tally of some volun-

tary sniping at the Germans, '2 Pomeranians', follows directly after an entry which reads '105 partridges'. Interestingly in line 40 of *Into Battle*, Grenfell speaks of 'lead nor steel'. Before 1916, any poetic references to weapons or warfare were invariably to those of the classical battlefield. Spears, shields, and swords stood for the ordnance, mechanization and barbed wire of reality. In alluding to modern weaponry Grenfell was atypical perhaps because he was a regular officer with previous experience of warfare.

Rupert Brooke was equally handsome, equally short-lived, equally suited to filling the role of warrior hero. A fellow of King's College, Cambridge, he infused his poetry and letters with classical references. When he found himself on a troopship bound for the Dardanelles, his enthusiasm became almost whimsical.

Do you think perhaps the fort on the Asiatic corner will want quelling... and they'll make a sortie and do you think they'll meet us on the plains of Troy? It seems to me strategically so possible. Shall we have a hospital base... at Lesbos? Will Hero's tower crumble under the 15in. guns? Will the sea be polyphloisbic and wine dark?

from Rupert Brooke, *Last letters* (1915).

For Brooke the proximity of Troy offered the potential for personal transformation but in the event he never saw action, dying of septicaemia, from a mosquito bite, on board a hospital ship. His last known work is a fragment:

They say Achilles in the darkness stirred... And Priam and his fifty sons,/ Wake all amazed and hear the guns / And shake for Troy again.

Disillusionment

Brooke was perceived as a modern classical hero: a role which could now be fulfilled without any notable act of heroism, or even having fought, but simply by dying. Of Brooke's brief sight of action (at Antwerp) Walter de la Mare wrote:

Ulysses himself at the end of his voyagings was not more quietly accustomed to the shocks of novelty.

D. H. Lawrence lamented:

he was slain by bright Phoebus' shaft . . . it was a real climax of his pose . . . bright Phoebus smote him down. It is all in the saga. O God, O God; it is all too much of a piece: it is like madness.

The poet Frances Cornford dedicated her own poem to her former friend, now god:

*A young Apollo, golden-haired,
Stands dreaming on the verge of strife,
Magnificently unprepared
For the long littleness of life.*

Through Bridges' choices a wide readership were told what it meant to be a soldier, but not what it was like to be one. War itself was to supply an alternative model. Although non-combatants largely hung on to the consolations of heroism, the control and direction of information had changed after 1916, with poetry and letters informed by the gruelling experience of modern warfare, created by those fighting. As an intoxication with war, and the explicit Homeric imagery which supported this, succumbed to the assaults of empiricism, shields and spears became machine guns and gas, although the poetry of trench warfare now found its classical resonances in book 6 of the *Aeneid*.

It was also in their own conduct that those fighting reconsidered the lessons of the classics. The poet Siegfried Sassoon also started the war as an Achilles. Rejoicing in the nickname Mad Jack he stalked the German trenches by night lobbing grenades

into their positions. By 1917 sensitivity to the predicament of his men had tempered his schoolboy ideals. In January the famous poet and holder of the Military Cross made a statement decrying the aims and management of the war. This was read out in the House of Commons and published in the newspapers. The high-profile Sassoon avoided a court martial, but the dissident hero was placed in psychiatric care in the hospital at Craiglockhart where a meeting with Wilfred Owen was poetically intense and fruitful. (The story is partly told in Pat Barker's *Regeneration Trilogy*.) Although Owen's poetry was only published posthumously its depictions of horror and chaos are the most enduring literary account of the experience of war. For both men poetry was no longer a heroic conceit but a strongly political statement; poets were needed to bear witness; to become Charles Sorley's *ἀοιδός* (bard). 'True poets must be truthful' Owen wrote. What was retained from Homer was the imperative to retell and remember.

Yet in 1936 William Butler Yeats edited the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, excluding both Sassoon and Owen: *passive suffering*, he wrote in the introduction

is not a theme for poetry. In all the great tragedies, tragedy is a joy to the man who dies; in Greece the tragic chorus danced.

Yeats asserted that the literary expression of battle should be tragic, heroic, and thus transcendent and apolitical. He included only two war poets, Grenfell and Brooke; the two that Bridges had chosen for his anthology, twenty years earlier.

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